DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 975 RC 022 239

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TITLE Rural School Students' Experiences on the Transition from Primary School to Secondary School.
PUB DATE 1998-09-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the European Conference for Educational Research (Ljubljana, Slovenia, September 17-20, 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/index.html.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consolidated Schools; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; Qualitative Research; *Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; Secondary School Students; Small Schools; *Student Adjustment; *Student Attitudes; Student Experience; Teacher Student Relationship; *Transfer Students
IDENTIFIERS Elementary School Secondary School Relationship; *Finland

ABSTRACT

A study in Finland examined rural students' experiences of the transition from a small rural primary school (grades 1-6) to a bigger village secondary school (grades 7-9). Qualitative data were obtained from essays written by 132 students in 13 small rural primary schools, 1 village school, and 1 city school. Students wrote the essays as 6th-graders in elementary school and again as 7th-graders in secondary school. Results indicate that the transition requires different kinds of adaptation from rural and city students, the most significant factors for rural students being changes in the school's physical, social, and pedagogical environment. Many rural students were disappointed with social relationships in the classroom or with the teaching, and faced social or cognitive problems. The change from the class, teacher-based learning environment of the primary school to the subject, teacher-based learning environment of the secondary school demanded a considerable amount of adaptation from students. The secondary school learning environment became more impersonal, formal, and competitive, and teachers became more controlling just at the point when adolescents were seeking more autonomy. Finally, students' achievement did not necessarily correspond to how well they had adjusted to their new school. Recommendations include more equal communication between secondary teachers and students and better cooperation between primary and secondary schools. Communities should reconsider whether to close small rural schools because the resulting extended transportation time results in unequal opportunities to cope with secondary school. (Contains 27 references.) (TD)

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ED 438 975

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RURAL SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

Paper presented to Symposium on
Children's Experiences - Crossing Boundaries
Network: Communities and their schools
Session 7.03
ECER 1998

17-20 September 1998
University of Ljubljana
Ljubljana, Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems related to the transition of pupils (n= 41) from sparsely populated areas to upper level schools on the basis of one study. The Finnish society's development has partly amplified the migration from rural to built-up areas, which then has led to the abolishment of small rural schools. Small country schools are vanishing year after year and in the future, governmental changes, like for example one common comprehensive school set new challenges also to the development of rural area schools.

The threat of closing down the small, two-teacher schools in the rural areas and the pupils' transference from sparsely populated areas' schools to the upper level schools in population centers are some of the significant changes from the pupils' point of view, which affect their school attendance. Both the school community, the environment around it and the pupils have seen the abolishment of schools as a problem. At the same time, as rural area pupils move to the upper levels schools of built-up areas, their way to school extends, and big challenges are set on the youths' independence development.

Based on this study, the expectations of small school pupils were positive before transition and they felt that their own school was more supportive to a single pupil, also the requirement levels seemed lower and smaller schools seemed less stressing than what the large school pupils felt. Schools' development plans and the possible changes resulting from them in school activity, work habits, resources etc. are also kind of periods of reformation and adaptation for the pupils. As from the pupil's point of view when implementing single schools development plans, the differences between schools will probably grow larger and so also the youth's adaptation to the new school and it's learning environments may become difficult.

The typical Finnish rural area community and it´s schools

In Finland a typical rural area primary schools includes 1-3 teachers. The most typical rural schools are two-teacher schools where grades 1-2 constitute one teaching group and grades 3-6 another teaching group. Usually secondary schools are much bigger and they have many primary "feeder" schools to which these pupils will transfer after primary school.

In the rural area the community is considered important for the growth of children and adolescents. The Finnish society's development has partly amplified the migration from rural to built-up areas, which has then led to the abolishment of small rural schools. Small country schools are vanishing year after year. This means in practice, that pupils´ school journeys will become longer and they might have to adapt to

significant changes even earlier in their childhood. Both the school community, the environment around it and the pupils have seen the abolishment of small rural schools as being a problem.[1]

In Finland´s rural areas the pupils´ point of view is important, because of our comprehensive school system. The national foundations of the curriculum (1994) shifted the curriculum development to schools. Each school now has its own curriculum which profile their activities and educational aims.[2] During next year, 1999 governmental changes in school legislation, for example one common and undivided comprehensive school, will set new challenges also for the development of rural area primary and secondary schools. This means a challenge for the whole comprehensive school system, especially for the class- and subject teachers[3] and of course for the pupils.

Background of this research

On the basis of one study[4] this paper discusses the problems related to the transition of pupils (n= 41) from sparsely populated areas to secondary schools. The paradigm of this study is that a person´s development is seen as action in context[5]. Adolescents produce their own task environments to actively shape their development. Human development is a lifelong process consisting of continuous interaction between individuals and their interpersonal, sosiocultural and institutional environments. These interactions between individuals and their sociocultural contexts play a particularly important role during adolescent years.[6] During this stage of life, young people are frequently faced with changes and transitions in several different domains of their lives, such as schooling, occupation and interpersonal relationships.[7] In Western society, adolescence is also a stage of development which marks also the transition between the world and privileges of childhood, and the world and privileges of the adult.[8]

These transitions should not be seen as negative periods of our lives. These periods make it possible for the adolescents to develop their own identity[9] and try to make sense of, and evaluate, various events

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[1] Korpinen 1998, 5-20
[2] Opetushallitus 1994
[3] Pietarinen & Rantala 1998, 225-240
[4] Pietarinen 1998
[5] Bandura 1977; Brofenbrenner 1986, 287-309; Silbereisen, & Eyferth 1986, 3-16
[6] Nurmi 1996, 14-22
[7] Nurmi 1996, 14-22
[8] Haeys, 1994
[9] Erikson 1982, 239-268

they have been facing. In the current comprehensive school system rural area pupils have to face significant external and environmental changes when they transfer from the rural area primary school (grades 1-6) to the village secondary school (grades 7-9) in a position when they also have to cope with both internal (adolescence[10]) changes and evaluate their own strengths which will help them to handle new situations of stress.

Adolescence is the resolution of conflicts brought about by the profusion of role changes in adolescent life. If the increasing role demands of adolescence place too great a stress on the individual, then identity diffusion will result. This means that the individual becomes confused about who s/he is, in view of all the different roles which he seems to be playing.[11]

People will use different kinds of strategies for coping with stress, and in crises, with problems or transitions. [12] It also means, that once the person has manifested his or her own coping mechanisms and strengths, s/he can also evaluate reasons for his or her success or failure in different situations. Also the ways they think about the causes of various events and the factors which are connected to the event, described as causal attributions[13], plays an important role in these evaluations. [14] Attribution theories are explicitly about a link between the attribution one makes for an event, and one´s reaction and behaviour towards it. With the help of different kinds of experiences, pupils decide what is responsible for their success or failure during this transition process.[15] This study however, follows the tradition of school studies from the pupils´ point of view, when the pupils´ experience [16]:

- the size of the school,
- teaching styles and classroom management,
- organisation of teaching groups,
- differing teacher expectations,
- patterns of discipline and
- school climate as being significant school feature in the field of school improvement research.

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[10] Erikson 1982, 239-268; Rutter & Rutter 1993, 110-155; Alsaker 1995, 37-82
[11] Erikson 1982, 239-268
[12] Lazarus 1986, 39-53
[13] Weiner, 1986
[14] Nurmi 1996, 14-22
[15] Weiner, 1986
[16] Rutter et al. 1979, 10; Rudduck & Chaplain & Wallace 1996, 1-18

Research procedure

Northern Carelia is a province of 177 000 people in the easternmost part of Finland. The pupils of the 6th grades in a typical Finnish municipality of Polvijärvi, and the practice school from the city of Joensuu are the subjects of this research. The developing municipality of Polvijärvi is situated within 40 kilometres from the city of Joensuu. Polvijärvi has approximately 6000 inhabitants.

In this follow-up study, 132 comprehensive school pupils were examined. The learning environments consists of:

Thirteen small scattered settlement primary schools (n=41) and one of them was a village primary school (n=31) from Polvijärvi, and three primary classes in a practice school from Joensuu (n=60).

Because this data includes all the 6th graders from municipality of Polvijärvi in 1993, this is a significant environmental basis for studying in particular rural school pupils´ experiences on the transition from small scattered settlement area primary schools to the bigger village secondary school. Essay writing was used to collect the qualitative data.

The data was analyzed using mainly qualitative methods. It was collected in May 1993 when the pupils were 6th graders, in 1994 when the pupils were 7th graders and 1996 when they left the whole comprehensive school. In here I consider only these rural school pupils´ experiences before (6th grade) and after (7th grade) this transition process.

Results

Rural area pupils` expectations, problems and fears are individual, and therefore there are significant differences between pupils` adaptation during this transition period in the comprehensive school. *Pupils` expectations, problems and fears are related to the size and more complex organization of the new school, new forms of discipline and authority, new work demands, the prospect of being bullied and the possibility of losing friends.*[17]

[17] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174

A considerable group of rural area pupils are disappointed with social relationships in the classroom or with the teaching, and face social or cognitive problems after the period of transition. *Pupils experienced school as mainly the place were they can learn cognitive skills and were they can get different kind of information. Pupils´ didn't similarly experience school as the place to learn social skills.* At the same time they experienced teachers and especially peers as a significant influence on adolescents` schooling and coping during this transition.[18]

It is widely recognized that teachers and peers influence adolescents` schooling. Peer climate is very much implicit in escalating stress during transition to the secondary school: changing schools is painful because it disrupts peer networks and challenges peer group standing. Peer group issues also need to be taken seriously because they significantly affect achievement and behaviour.[19]

For pupils in rural and city schools, this transition period partly demands different kinds of adaptation because the move from the primary school to the secondary school includes many unexpected local factors that promote change. Especially rural school pupils face significant peer group changes because many rural schools are very small and usually with vertically grouped (mixed age) classes, the pupil has limited opportunities to work and socialise with others of their own age-group, and this becomes even more acute at the point of transfer to the "big school".[20] *The most significant factors which demands rural area pupils´ adaptation were changes in the school´s physical-, social- and pedagogical environment.*[21] Naturally there are also similarities and issues which consider both rural area and city pupils in this transition process, for example the pupils´ fear concerning the new bigger school´s customs and school culture.

It was also observed in previous studies that the factors regarded as advantages and disadvantages of small schools were associated with the environment and teaching. The peaceful country way of life, the positive effect of the environment on the children´s growth and the close co-operation between the school and community were considered environmental advantages, while some of the instructional advantages were the small size of classes, the individuality and family-like nature of the teaching, the

[18] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[19] Entwisle 1990; Alsaker 1995, 37-82
[20] Comber & Hargreaves 1997; Pietarinen 1998, 83-174

pupils´ independent work, the rarity of disciplinary problems, flexible teaching and ease of innovation.[22] On the basis of these results we can also understand pupils´ positive experiences and expectations before they move to the bigger secondary school[23].

The environmental disadvantages were related to the remoteness of schools. It was considered that remoteness restricted participation and involvement in hobbies on the part of both the pupils and teachers. The instructional disadvantages were connected with curriculum of multiple grades, use of time, the planning of teaching and various resources such as the availability of rooms, studying material and teaching aids.[24] During this transition from the rural primary school to the village secondary school, both environmental and instructional advantages appear to be important factors for the pupils. [25]

Pupils´ from the rural area experienced this transition process partly as an opportunity to personal growth and independence. At the same time they experienced that they could expand their environment, which for example provided more opportunities for going to the village library and meeting new friends.[26] On the basis of previous standpoints pupils brought up factors which are related to the school´s learning environment as significant issues in their experiences during this transition process. Previous studies[27] also shows that individuals react differently to the environmental changes which accompany school transition.

One surprising result was that pupils` school achievement did not necessarily relate as to how well they had adjusted to their new school.[28] In other words, as present studies also shows[29] the pupils know how to achieve good grades in school, but they do not feel that they can really take part in planning, decision making and developing various school activities. They also feel that the teacher-student relationship, and student relationships are not equally trustworthy.

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[21] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[22] Kalaoja 1990a, 3-34
[23] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[24] Kalaoja 1990a, 3-34
[25] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[26] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[27] Harter 1996, 11-42
[28] Pietarinen 1998, 83-174
[29] Linnakylä 1996, 69-85

On figure 1. of this paper I define the concept of the learning environment from the pupils´ point of view.[30] This model attempts to illustrate how teachers` and pupils` qualities are related to the classroom structure, to pupils` learning outcomes and social development. With the help of this model we can see that many factors affect the learning environment and will change during the transition to secondary school. In secondary school, pupils have a different kind of learning environment according to each subject they study.

The changes in the school´s learning environments, teachers´ behaviour, learning and teaching processes and social relationships, all demand a considerable amount of adaptation from the pupils. One of the reasons for this change is that in secondary school, the class teacher-based learning environment of the primary school, changes to a subject teacher-based learning environment. Important factors that affect classroom social interaction and the teaching and learning processes, are the teacher´s personal qualities, his or her pedagogical thinking, skills and teaching strategies. The learner`s personal qualities consist of his or her skills and learning strategies.

It is that teachers greatly influence the pupil´s development, and the nature of the learning environment. Many researchers have pointed to the importance of the quality of the learning environment and its influence on behaviour and school attendance.[31] Teacher greatly influence the pupil´s development and the quality of the atmosphere in which learning takes place is of indisputable importance.

[30] Pietarinen 1998, 171

[31] Galton & Willcocks 1983; Pollard, A. & Tann, S. 1989, 12-21; Cotterell 1992, 28-45; Harter 1996, 11-42

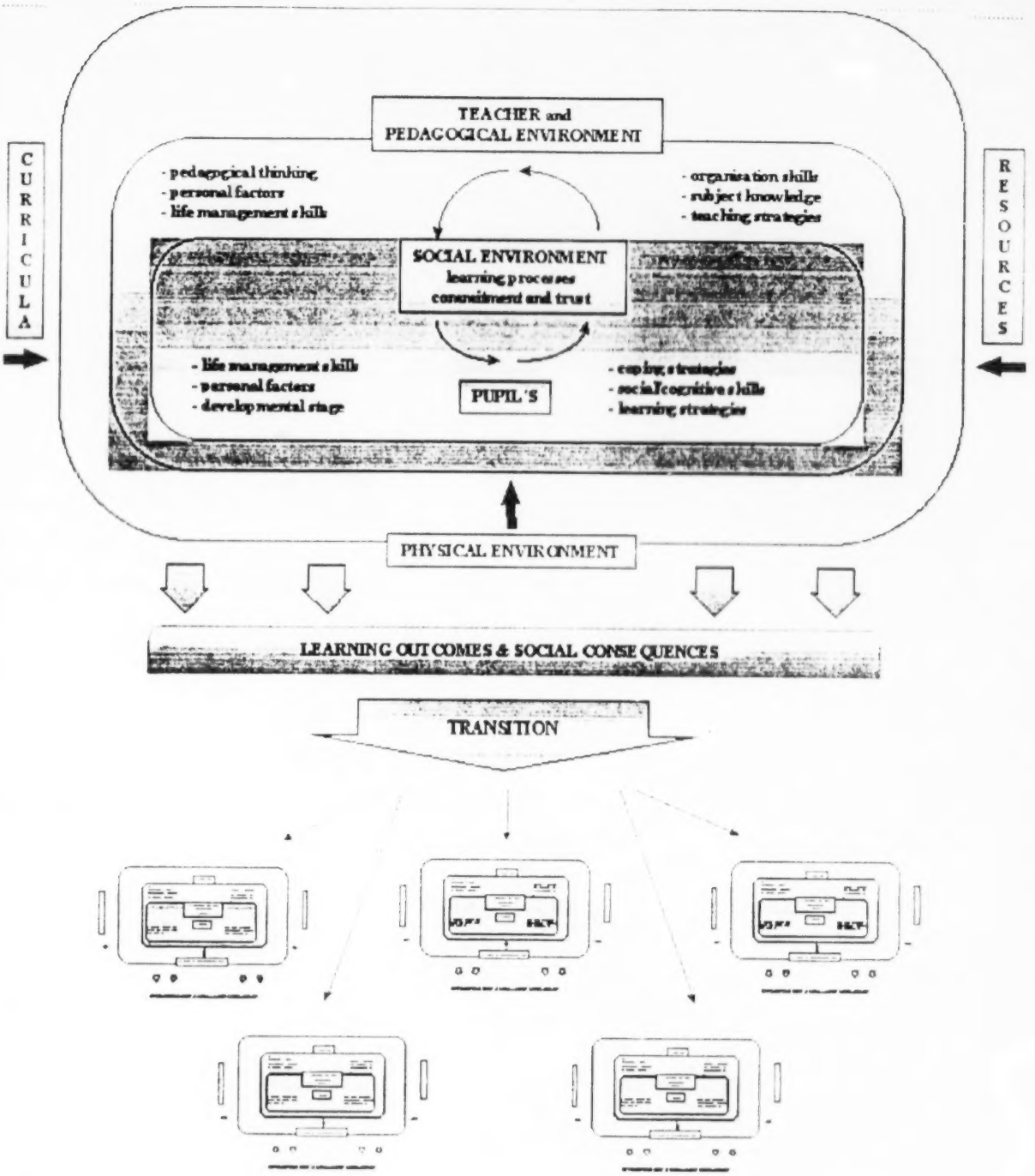

Figure 1. Learning environment from the pupils' point of view.

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Conclusions

The teacher`s influence on the pupils` development and on the quality of the learning environment is also important from the pupils` point of view. Teachers, in particular, should understand the importance of the transition from primary school to secondary school and try to adjust to a new way of thinking which takes into account what the pupil´s previous physical-, social- and pedagogical environment and learning strategies were.

In practice it means that class- and subject teachers should more actively accumulate different kinds of information from pupils´ and their experiences from school as a learning environment. This process increases more equal communication between teachers and pupils. At the same time adolescents feel that they can more actively take part in school improvement and experience that they can produce their own task environments to actively shape their development.

As I mentioned previously pupils have to cope with internal (adolescence) and external (environmental) changes. The success or failure of this coping process depends on mutual timing of these changes and on the person`s ability to cope with these situations. The mutual timing of these changes is related to pupils` school adjustment in the secondary school. Class- and subject teachers´ roles in the pupils´ process of coping can be termed as "observers" who can flexibly change their action and plans during the school day, so that they can support pupils in demanding situations, and even teach them to be more aware for their own strengths and coping strategies.

It has been also noted that in the transition to a new school, the learning environment becomes more impersonal, more formal, more evaluative and more competitive than in the elementary grade. Teachers become more controlling just at the point when adolescents are seeking more autonomy. In addition, the teacher-student relationship is becoming more impersonal just at the same time as students, in their

bid for autonomy, increasingly need the personal support of adults other than their parents.[32] This data revealed and confirmed this same issue.

Therefore there is a need for improving schools' learning environments and especially the social environment so that social interaction will work between teachers and pupils and in peer groups. This process demands more equal communication between teachers and pupils.

In other words, it means also that we have to expand the concept of the peer group so that by thus we do not only mean youths of the same age group, but we emphasize individuals' areas of common and shared interest and equal communication, where teachers also have a more realistic opportunity of taking part "as a group member" in students' peer group within the school context. In an effort to develop the teaching[33], which at the same time raises the level of continuity of the comprehensive school and thus rural area pupils' adaptation, co-operation between small primary schools and secondary schools and their teachers and pupils on the other has been improved.

To make the whole comprehensive school even more closer to the pupils, the class- and subject teachers must know the community and their schools in which the youths live. Communities have to reconsider their plans for the abolishment of small rural schools because pupils experienced that long school days due to the extended journeys affect their school achievement. There is then a risk in the future that all pupils will not have equal opportunities "to cope with" comprehensive school.

Rural schools' pupils should be seen as a significant resource in a process of school improvement especially during this transition process. But the utilization of this school improvement resource depends on the class- and subject teachers' ability to use this potential in their every day school work.

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[32] Eccles & Midgley 1988, 139-186
[33] Kalaoja 1990b, 91-110

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